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THE NOVELS OF ROBERT HERRICK.

BY W. D. HOWELLS.

It would be easy, but I am not sure that it would be well, to count on the fingers of one hand the American novelists of a later generation than Mr. Henry James, who are at once moralists and artists, who set the novel of manners above all other fiction, and who aim at excellence in it with unfailing conscience. When I have generalized in these terms, I find that I have specialized, and without treading the devious and dangerous paths of comparative criticism have arrived at the work of Mr. Robert Herrick, which I prefer to consider positively. It does not stand alone; but it is quite sensibly part of what is alone vital in our imaginative literature; it is apparently, if not actually, the fulfilment of an ethical impulse effecting itself by means of truth to life, and by the study of character, serious, self-respectful, a little less lightened by humor than I could wish, but kept in its course by its constancy to a high purpose. It asks courage in the reader who shrinks from pain; but if he will once submit himself to its conditions, it will hold him to the last word with a grip on his interest which nothing merely amusing will lay. As I understand, this is what the reader primarily wants; but Mr. Herrick's fiction will do something more for him; it will keep him under its spell when he has shut the book. It will give him something to think about: himself, for instance, and his relations to other men very like himself in their common human nature. If his thoughts are not altogether pleasant, it will appeal to his sense of justice to declare why, and it ought to set him about seeing how he can make his thoughts pleasant.

The novels of Mr. Herrick, so far as I know them, are six; and none of them is unimportant. They relate, except the one which is least important, to Chicago, and they are mainly peopled

by Chicagoans, especially Chicagoan women, either native or of that more Eastern or more Western derivation which somehow fails of making Chicago cosmopolitan. In holding the mirror up to Chicago, the author does not always show her a flattering image; but I should not be prepared to say from this fact alone that he showed her a faithful image. I find its truth in something less extrinsic, in the sort of assurance that an author cannot help giving you in his first page, unless he is an uncommonly clever trickster, that he is not faking. That is, not consciously faking, for there may be an essential artificiality in him, as there certainly is not in Mr. Herrick, which keeps him from knowing the real from the unreal, and so far absolves him of the sin against light and knowledge which is the worst of sins in a novelist. Mr. Herrick's work covers the ground covered by the work of Mr. Henry B. Fuller, of Mr. Will Payne, of Miss Edith Wyatt, and I dare say by that of other novelists whose books I have not read or not read so often; for the work of their Chicago group is so good that I like to recur to it better than to that of any other Americans now writing fiction.

The order in which I have acquainted myself with Mr. Herrick's novels is that of "The Gospel of Freedom," "Memoirs of an American Citizen," "The Common Lot," "Together," "Jock o' Dreams" and "The Web of Life"; but the fourth of these is the latest published and is quite new. All of them are modern in the full, frank and fearless spirit of their dealing with their material. The material will sometimes seem of its own choosing, but probably it is always the author's, and it is only one of the proofs of his skill in illusion that he should seem chosen by it. I do not say but it sometimes seeks its own ends beyond the scope of his primary intention, and in certain cases implies a precept where it was merely meant to offer an instance. For example, "Together" has to do with that new ferment of the old wine of individualism in women's character which is observable in their modern life, though not, I fancy, so often as our novelist appears to think. He may be painting moods, however, where he seems to be painting lives, when he portrays so many women loathing their husbands in the first moments of marriage, or getting sick of them as marriage keeps relentlessly on, and breaking from them at last in open or covert rebellion. In these appearances, if they are not realities, the book is franker than we once

supposed desirable for young people of their sex; details of emotion and behavior long blinked in Anglo-Saxon fiction are not spared; but it is to be noted in the book's behalf that the facts are recognized with a pathological decency. Yet there is one of these moods, or lives, or whatever, which will persist as question in the minds of those come to the knowledge of good and evil, and which I should not think it right in a critic to pass by. The question is whether a woman who despises the weakness or badness of her husband to the extreme of going off for several days and living with the man she has come to love, can be taken to have sufficiently expiated her sin by refusing, when left free, to marry the man she lawlessly loves.

One uses that quaint old word "sin," which has almost dropped out of our vocabulary, with a certain sense of its obsolescence, and perhaps of its original inaccuracy. Yet, with all its faults, one must still use it, for it indicates, if it does not strictly define, the sort of offence against morals which is not a crime. The offence is personal; and, so far as we know, the agency which we must still call "God" punishes it, just as crime is a social offence and Man punishes it, or vice is a physical offence and Nature punishes it. But a time seems to arrive when a sin can no longer be left to the sinner and his God, and when it becomes a social offence and man must punish it. Or, perhaps, not punish it; that is another of the troublesome questions; and generally man solves the question by wishing it could be left altogether to God. The freedom which the woman in "Together" won from her hateful marriage in the joy of her escape to her lover was that "freedom of the broken law" which Hawthorne recognized in its eternal impossibility as a part of conduct. So long as the law lasts, whether it is founded in God or founded in man, that freedom cannot be permitted without ruin. The law must be forever obeyed, or it must be forever repealed. It may be that the hour has come in which the woman shall say, when the minister asks her if she takes the man for her husband: "Yes, as long as I can I will love him; as long as I respect his mind and heart I will honor him; as long as I think him wise I will obey him. But when I cannot and do not, then I shall feel myself free to go away with some man whom I do love and honor and obey, for a day or forever, and I promise you that I will never have a moment's remorse from it." One may say, for argument's

sake, that perhaps it may be well so to amend the marriage vow; but, while the marriage vow remains as it is, and men and women take one another, for better or worse, till death do them part, then apparently the freedom of the broken law is the bond of iniquity. It is not less really so because it is not apparently so in the case supposed in "Together." Its motive is not altered by the circumstance that the woman is a woman of peculiar courage, courage enough to ignore the fact that she has dishonored her little son who loves her paramour and is equally loved by him and herself; her offence is the ranker for this reason.

One holds Mr. Herrick to account for greater clearness in this passage of his story, because of the absolute clearness of his meaning in the like passages of his other stories. I think he sees the social conditions, as regards the wilfulness and waywardness of women, rather redder than they are, or say yellower, for there is a strain of vulgarity in their aberrations which is very suggestive of a kind of modern journalism; and that, perhaps, he mistakes some of the tricky

"Lights that do mislead the dawn"

of women's greater independence for the balefires of the Pit; and yet it is well to have inquired into the facts with unsparing fearlessness. It is ground in our fiction through which the pioneer must break his way, but it may be that it is time the way were broken. If Mr. Herrick is rather lonely in it as yet, he has company enough in the criticism of our economic and commercial life. It is already long since this was supposed to be without a close and constant relation to our spiritual life, and many of our novelists have already affirmed the contrary in saws and instances only a little too loud, a little too exceptional. What makes Mr. Herrick so useful in this field is his artistic self-control. Such books as "The Common Lot" and "The Memoirs of an American Citizen" strike me as scarcely amiss in any detail, and they are without the hectic flush which in an author imparts itself to his subject, and makes his reader doubt if it be the hue of life. The books are, of course, rather the more terrible on account of their quiet veracity; and their convincing power brings us to a wholesome shame for what we have so largely become. They are not only terrible, but they are terrifying in certain climaxes, such as that awful hour in "The Common Lot," when the architect

who has "stood in" with the jerry-builder sees the victims of his fraudulent construction drop into the roaring volcano which his "fire-proof" edifice has become. As you look on with the wretched man, whose moral ruin has been so reasonable, so logical, you become one with him in your consciousness of like possibilities in yourself. When a novelist can do this with his reader, he has taken himself out of the category of futile villain-mongers and placed himself in the high, clear air where George Eliot discovered in our common human nature her immortal Tito.

It is grosser human material which the author deals with in "The Memoirs of an American Citizen," but the basis of the story is wider, and in its more inclusive portraiture of manners it is a greater book. When it need be fine, it can be so fine that it will bear microscopic examination, like those feats of Pre-raphaelite art which were as true whether you looked at them across the room or put your eyes close to them. The business career which is the theme of the epic is handled with as much skill in its implications as in its facts; the spiritual and material incidents are portrayed with an equal sense of their outer appearance and their inner significance. It is hard to say whether the autobiographic form of the story is altogether an advantage; the meaning has often to be suggested rather than expressed by the autobiographer's carefully guarded unconsciousness of it; that is a triumph for the author, but perhaps the triumph is less than he would have achieved in the historical form. That, however, is merely a technical question which does not concern the vitality of the book: what makes it so exceptionally vital is the insight with which it penetrates to so many recesses of so many kinds of American character, searching motive and tracing action to inevitable consequence. Men and women, old and young, high and low, in business and in pleasure, in commerce, politics and society, are seen and shown in that newer world of the West which is the heart of the New World now aging so rapidly into the image of the Old. The novelist paints human nature, which is forever the same and is forever changing to fit itself to the changing conditions for good as well as for evil. The persistence of the eternal ideals of right, even in the souls of them that do wrong, and are increasingly callous to the stings of conscience, is as evident in the autobiographer as in those who reject him in his hour of triumph and realize his essential defeat. The moral

is worked out in no allegorical abstractions, but is shown in the very texture, the warp and woof of our life.

A signally uncommon touch of characterization is the autobiographer's recognition that in some points of conduct he may have been, or really was, rather awry, but that in broadening opportunity for thousands by increasing the general facilities, by promoting prosperity, and so "doing good," his merit has been greater than that of those who have merely kept themselves straight. He has been the agent, the ally, not to say the accomplice, the "pal" of Providence, and he knows it, whether Providence knows it or not. Still, he is not boastful; a man who has come from the farthest way back, and through a purely business career, has advanced himself to a seat in the United States Senate need not boast. A certain uneasiness rankles in him; but that cannot be helped, and that is all.

It is a grim book, and "The Web of Life" is a tragical book with as much fealty to truth and more final comfort. Public interests enter into it, as they do into nearly every book of Mr. Herrick's, but it is a personalized relation which its people bear to them. If I did not think so well of his other books I might say this was his best: there is a poetic sense of Fate in it, quite short of fatalism, and a pathos which the austere Nemesis of "The Common Lot," for instance, does not indulge. Mr. Herrick always, probably, evolves his characters with reference to their origin, which may be as simple as you like; he lets them keep their tradition, their conscious past, through whatever social successes tempt them or reward them; and we often see in them the truth noted by Mr. George Ade that "Chicago is a city made up of country people . . . a metropolis having a few saving virtues of a village." Such a saying is a key to the secret of what goes on in the minds and hearts of nearly all the people in "The Web of Life," and they are the more interesting because they have not lost the strong vitality deriving from the Indiana village or the Wisconsin farm. It is a great book, but sad, sad.

I might say the same things in different proportion of Mr. Herrick's other books. I do not know the order of them, but I should think "Jock o' Dreams" (which I like better by its second name of "The Real World") was the youngest of them. The scene for once is not in Chicago at all, but in a Boston suburb, in a Maine summer settlement, and in New York. It is so placed with-

out weakening the action, and with an advantage in the variety of types studied. The young people are especially well done, both the city and the country young people. The university impress in several of the young men, whether they have been of great or of no importance at Harvard, whether they are snobs or swells, is caught with skill; the hero is always truthfully and interestingly shown, and he is as new to fiction as he is true and interesting. One thoroughly likes him and likes to feel that he is the American stuff, as surely so as any character of Tourguenieff's is the Russian stuff; from the beginning to the end he is excellently ascertained. The heroine, if she is the heroine, the Europeanized Ohio village girl, who is untrue to her best in marrying money and to her worst in not being faithful to it, is never quite convincing, and at times in the supreme moments she is quite unconvincing. She is that phase of the eternal feminine which betrays the author in "Together" not merely to the excessive impartiality which I have noted in a particular case, but to what I think a strabismic vision of our woman-world.

It has not gone so far wrong as all that in its love or its lust of individuality, of self-worship, though it may be going that way. But there are many provisional and some final arrests, which Mr. Herrick has himself noted in "The Gospel of Freedom," and upon the whole I must regard that as his greatest book, greater in a wider if not deeper sort than "The Web of Life." It is not, to my thinking, more important because it deals with a woman of "higher" derivation; but it is the more notably successful, because it finds her and keeps her entirely human, which is more difficult with the women of our "world," East or West, than with the women of our life. There is not so much hurry, not so much intensity, as one is aware of in Mr. Herrick's more hyperæsthetic stories; he has not, apparently, so much to prove or to reprove; but the evidence and the penalty are clearly there. The well-born, well-bred and well-principled woman whose relation to art promises to be indefinitely amateurish, and who hopes to find her more vital and practical self in marriage with a business American after being his business partner, and who then abandons her failure and returns, returns in vain, to the life of sterile æsthetic enjoyment, this is the skeleton of a story which the art of Mr. Herrick has clothed in flesh and blood, and given veracity and constantly increasing significance. I do not remem-

ber any point where his art played me false or descended for however good a purpose to dissembling. The people are such as from your experience of men and women you know to be veritable, and without being over-motived, they work out to the inevitable end. It is the highest privilege of the artist to take not only morally mean and nasty people, but dull and tiresome ones, and by virtue of showing their reality to make them interesting and even fascinating, as Mr. Herrick does in more than one book. The detestable little æsthete (who is the sole "hero" of "The Gospel of Freedom"), living upon the liberality of those who really love beauty more than he, without the expectation or promise of use in his study of the beautiful, is no more a triumph of that author's art than such a null and merely selfish woman as the heroine's mother, who seems merely to happen in it. But the highest triumph of all is the equilibrium in which it holds the reader's feeling toward the heroine. This is a balance which seems the effect of her own nature, and though it trembles now toward the squalor of moral ruin and now towards the pathos of innocent suffering, it does not finally incline towards either. She is what she has become: a woman who has sought herself and not others in what she has been and done, and who pays the cost.

In my sense of this fine art so strong and so definite, I am struck with the likeness between my author's extrinsic case and that of Mr. Leonard Merrick, the young English novelist whom I wrote of here some time ago. Each book of Mr. Herrick has had due recognition from criticism; his good faith, his rare power, his high purpose in each have been fully acclaimed, but he has failed of an assembled and united acceptance as one of the greatest Americans now writing fiction. Inferior names are more constantly the praise of the unanimity which is not the lasting majority; that is not so bad; but his name has not been of that thoughtfuller mention which his work has merited. That is, it seems so to me; but I am of the passing generation whose sight and hearing are not so good as they were; and it is very possible I am mistaken. I should be very willing to think so, and I put away gladly the misgivings which beset one when one has written warmly in praise of an author. I will still believe that with the one break noted in "Together" Mr. Herrick's fiction is a force for the higher civilization which to be widely felt needs only to be widely known. At the end I do not feel that I have said all

I might in its behalf: its good sense, its right-mindedness, its courage, its generous, its indignant impatience with our social and economic oppressions, its perception that the individual life is in no wise separable from the general life; and there is one fact of it which I wish still more specifically to note. If Mr. Herrick were older I should say he had learned from life how patient people are with disappointment, in the larger rather than the smaller experiences, and how beautiful and pathetic their resignation to fate is. As he is not an old man, but young enough to write many more excellent fictions, I must suppose that he divined the fact. What I should finally say of his work is that it is much more broadly based than that of any other American novelist of his generation. The fact is not affected by the other fact that it has not the same width above ground as below. It is founded in the universal passions and propensities, but the superstructure is rather of the exceptional than the universal experiences. This is in a measure inevitable. The novelist takes uncommon lives out of the common life; and if he is wise he shows them as instances, not as examples; but he must make this clear. If he is, like Mr. Herrick, a moralist as well as an artist this is especially his duty.

W. D. HOWELLS.